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ABSTRACT

Plain talk is the cornerstone for creating a classroom atmosphere in which students want to learn to improve their writing. As much as possible, the jargon and technical terminology of the profession of English should be eliminated. Teachers will know what level of language to use if they determine the nature of their audience. Teachers have to meet the needs of students from various backgrounds, economic levels, and age groups. One method which can help teachers learn about their audiences is a short-answer questionnaire which contains 18 questions. The answers are often revealing and help the educator know how to approach the class and individual students. Another method is an oral self-introduction in which students come to the podium to introduce themselves. Building group cohesiveness is important to classroom atmosphere. Another way to bond a class is to make them feel superior as individuals and as a group. This can be done through group projects and the editing of "barbarisms." Plain talk, determining the nature of the audience, and building cohesion among students, combined with the teacher's enthusiasm, can develop an atmosphere in which students want to learn to write. (MG)

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William A. Sprunk, Jr.

Creating a Classroom Atmosphere

The title of this presentation is "Creating a Classroom Atmosphere" ; that is, an atmosphere in which students want to come to learn to improve their writing. This atmosphere is developed through a combination of methods I have developed, stolen, and stumbled upon in twenty-five years of teaching.

Plain talk is the cornerstone for creating classroom atmosphere. As much as possible, the jargon and technical terminology of the profession of English is eliminated. For example, one dictum from a widely-used handbook is: "Be suspicious of expletive constructions." Translated into plain talk this means: "Don't write a lot of sentences that begin with 'There is, There are, and It is.' Put strong nouns and verbs first in the sentence." Students understand this. They do not know--nor do they necessarily need to know--what an expletive construction is (The handbook, by the way, never defines or clearly explains expletive constructions).

Plain talk is language students understand; it is the language they speak. Should we talk like our students? Some of them are not very articulate. Sometimes we should talk like our students, but for the most part we just need to talk in language that is free of jargon and obscure polysyllabic words. We need to translate complex terminology into less complex terms. We need to do what we tell our students: "Define your terms."

We will know what level of language to use if we determine the nature of our audiences : an elementary

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principle of public speaking. The varied nature of the student population makes this more important than in the days of a homogeneous student population. Now we have to shift gears to meet the needs of students from various backgrounds, economic levels, and age groups. For example, an evening class composed of older students requires different techniques than a morning class of recent high school graduates. The older students may demand more dialogue, because they are less liable to accept information without question. Their life experience has taught them otherwise.

Numerous methods exist to help us learn about our audiences. I use two of them in my classes. The first is a short answer questionnaire which contains 18 questions. They are personal questions: Do you have a job? If so, what is it and how many hours a week do you work? Do you have any children? What are their names and ages? What is you favorite musical group? What is you major concern today?

The answers are often revealing and help me determine my approach to the class and to individual students. I know now, for example, why one obviously bright young woman always appears tired and sometimes a little shaky. She's an eighteen year old single mother of a one year old boy named Peter; she works 25 hours a week and goes to school full time. She probably needs some extra encouragement just to stay in school.

The second method I use to help determine the nature of

my audience is an oral self-introduction. Students come to the podium and introduce themselves. They give their names; tell where they're from; tell what they do for fun; and present one belief they hold strongly. To find out that five students are strongly anti-racist can alter the nature of the assignments for that class (I also participate in the self-introductions).

Building group cohesiveness -- a sense of belonging --is also important to classroom atmosphere. I want my students to want to come to class. I want my students to want to learn to write better. I want them to come freely. Attendance is not taken. But if the atmosphere is good, students come to class.

The self-introductions help to evaluate the audience. They also help to establish cohesiveness. Most students don't like to come to the front of the class to talk. But as more and more of them drag themselves from their seats, a camaraderie begins to develop. Every one is applauded and the most fearful are encouraged by the others. They begin to feel that since they're all in the same sinking ship, they might as well make the best of it.

Group projects are another method to bring students together. In Writing for the Professions the class is divided into teams of three or four students. Their task is to write a description and set of operating instructions for a piece of audio/visual equipment. The operating instructions will be given to another team who will follow them exactly. The students' attitude toward this assignment is usually, "No

sweat. We'll knock this out in no time." I allot six hours of class time to the project. They use all six hours. The sense of being part of the group is strong when they've finished the project.

Another way to bond a class is to make them feel superior as individuals and as a group. I have several files of barbarisms. These are examples of misuse of the English language and its conventions. Students' papers, corporate correspondence, newsletters, newspapers, letters, advertisements and other documents make up the source of these materials. Much of the material has been contributed by students who have become attuned to bad writing. The following passages are from a book entitled Teaching Writing, the author of which shall remain unnamed:

> Forming a group. Much of our success in a writing class will depend on our ability to get the class to fell like a distinctive group. One way of developing group identity is to meet in a different setting (at the library or at a film) once twice during the semester. Because we unconsciously compartmentalize our lives, students are physically surprised to see that you and they can appear together at a different place or a different time. Once the group recoheres in the classroom, the class begins to feel the pride of having shared some intricate task together.
>
> ....
>
> The best way to get student to care about the language

they choose to use is not to allow their words to float in the oblivion (a pile on the teacher's desk) to which they have consigned them, but to keep fixing their words in place, "published" on dittoed paper.

Even the less skilled writers recognize bad writing and weak thinking. They are confident they can write better than this--and this was written by an English teacher. Their comments are devastating; their criticism is pointed ; their revisions are excellent.

The group projects and the editing of barbarisms are serious projects. But they are also fun. And the sense of fun--the sense of play--is important to the classroom. The job of learning to write well becomes less tedious, less difficult when tempered by humor. I like David Barry's attitude in his essay "What Is and Ain't Grammatical," contained in his book Bad Habits: A 100% Fact Free Book. He writes:

> I cannot overemphasize the importance of grammar.
>
> What a crock. I could easily overemphasize the importance of good grammar. For example, I could say,"Bad grammar is the leading cause of slow, painful death in North America," or "Without good grammar, the United States would have lost World War II."
>
> The truth is that grammar is not the most important thing in the world. The Super Bowl is the most important thing in the world. But grammar is still important. For example, suppose you are being interviewed for a job as

an airplane pilot, and your prospective employer asks you if you have any experience, and you answer: "Well, I ain't never actually flied no actual airplanes or nothing, but I got several pilot-style hats and several friends who I like to talk about planes with."
If you answer this way, the prospective employer will immediately realize that you have ended your sentence with a preposition....So you will not get the job....

This is a jaundiced point of view perhaps, but a point well taken by students who have been told in plain talk: Never send out anything over your name with one mistake in it. You won't get the job; you won't get the promotion; you won't get what you want from the other person.

To conclude, plain talk, determining the nature of our audience, and building cohesion among students, combined with our own enthusiasm, can develop an atmosphere in which students want to learn to write.

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